

Review of *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom* by Rinaldo Walcott (Duke University Press)

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ABSTRACT In *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom*, Rinaldo Walcott argues, through the use of short essays, that the Black experience can be understood through the lens of the constant struggle for emancipation. For Walcott, true freedom for Black people was never attained with emancipation and in fact, emancipation is still an ongoing process. Each chapter interrogates an aspect of Black life and death that according to Walcott create the space for Black freedom to exist.

KEYWORDS citizenship, colonialism, race, Blackness, freedom, modernity

The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom. By Rinaldo Walcott. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021. 129 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478014058. US List: \$23.95

In *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom*, Rinaldo Walcott engages with ideas of the racialized conception of human through his analysis of Black life and freedom. It is emancipation that Walcott wants to problematize, asserting that there is a clear distinction between the condition of emancipation and freedom. While historically we have seen the two as interchangeable, Walcott insists that for Black people, freedom has not yet been attained and that we are currently living in the state of the long emancipation (1), where policies of emancipation continuously place Black people in a state of subordination (4). Emancipation is part of a legal justification of life and humanity. It concerns a type of continued attachment to laws and policies that render Blackness outside of humanity. It is here that Walcott sees the work of his book, to examine the ways that the concept of emancipation has actually denied true Black freedom and to think broadly about what possibilities of Black freedom are created under this kind of peculiar existence of the Black subject.

Set up as short vignettes, each chapter explores Walcott's theories of Black life, death, and freedom. Walcott's focus on unfettering emancipation and freedom for the Black subject offers a nuanced understanding of the state of Black life and possibilities for freedom.

Throughout the text, Walcott uses the term "Black life form" as a move to reiterate the space outside of white European/American concepts of human that Black life existed and continues to exist. Black subjects have been defined in relationship to European Enlightenment ideas of humanity and thus emancipation and freedom cannot be seen the same. Walcott spends chapters 1 through 4 unpacking his theory of freedom through the understanding of Black death. Walcott sees the Americas as the zone for Black death, while it simultaneously produces Black life. It is under the constant threat of death that Black life forms are able to understand their lives and create vibrant cultures that reflect life. This is perhaps the kind of opportunity for freedom that Walcott sees. He makes the claim that, for Black life forms, potential freedom does not take the shape of a modernist linear narrative (3). Rather, it finds itself in the crevasses and cracks of what we think of as freedom. This is the long emancipation, this temporal space where there remains the juridical and legislative state of Black nonbeing, where freedom must squeeze through.

Walcott's theoretical framework also guides the organization of the book. Just like the way that Walcott sees freedom in the long emancipation, the chapters are not linear. They bounce around and feed off of one another without explicitly building on each other. Connections between each chapter are thread together within this larger discussion of freedom and Black life, but each chapter feels as though they can stand alone. Chapters 4, "Black Death," "Plantation Zones," and "Diaspora Studies," are examples of how Walcott does this. His chapter on "Black Death" speaks to how transatlantic slavery gives birth to our modern ideas of Blackness and a denial of humanity. Then he moves to "Plantation Zones" to further reiterate the Americas as a place of death and also the birth of Blackness. He then jumps to a conversation about diaspora studies and the importance of its ability to engage with the idea of transatlantic slavery and indigenous colonialization as intertwined and part of forging concepts of non-human Blackness. Since each chapter acts like stand-alone prose, Walcott spends significant time reiterating and clarifying his argument throughout the book. Thus, his text very much feels like a meditation of the various ways that Walcott sees freedom in the context of Black life and historicizing this long emancipation.

However, Walcott doesn't want to leave the reader without future possibility. Walcott firmly asserts that Black people have survived, created life and produced glimpses of freedom despite being rendered politically and economically outside of the definition of human. In his chapter, "Newness," Walcott reflects on the Funk musical genre as a space where Black freedom exists. Its musical notes, dances, lyrics, and artists buck against modern notions of respectability. In these creative performances, a new Black life is made human. That is how Walcott understands where the long emancipation leads us—constructing new forms of freedom, carving out spaces that refashion ideas of humanity, and reconstructing definitions of freedom outside of modernity and European Enlightenment. For Walcott,

freedom becomes the response that Black people have to the world, not one that was or can be granted with emancipation.

The Long Emancipation is part of a larger discourse on the construction of Blackness and issues of citizenship that come with that. He invokes conversations with Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and C.L.R. James and highlights contemporary discussions with writers like Scott Poulson-Bryant, Christina Sharpe, and Richard Iton. Walcott reminds us that there are limitations to understanding Black freedom and humanity under our current systems and that we must go beyond them. His vision is best seen when he says, "the Black life-form in its most radical livability seeks to reject and rethink the human as a category through which pure radical possibilities for life-making might be available for all of us" (72).

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